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DEALING FAIRLY WITH THE ANCESTORS: THE USES OF TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN THE WEST AFRICAN NOVEL

by

(C)

MARTIN KONGNYUY JUMBAM

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the reaction of writers (African and non-African alike) to the all-pervasive presence of traditional religious beliefs among the peoples of West Africa. After an introduction in which I give a justification for the choice of my topic, I then proceed to examine the generally negative reactions of colonialist writers (travellers and administrators) to the religious beliefs of the colonized Africans. This is followed by a look at the fiction of the first generation of African writers, fresh graduates of missionary and colonial schools who were taught to laud christianity and the "civilizing" role of colonialism while denigrating their own indigenous cultures.

However, the reaction of the second generation of African writers -- represented here by Chinua Achebe of Nigeria and Camara Laye of Guinea -- differs markedly from that of the colonialist writer and from that of the first generation of African writers. To these post-World War Two writers, true literary inspiration lies in the writer's return to his ancestral beliefs -- of which traditional religion is a central pillar.

In spite of the massive return of modern African writers to the religious beliefs of their people, critics, whose duty it is to dive below the surface and bring into the open what would otherwise remain hidden in a culture's subconscious, have either ignored the omnipresence of traditional religion in African fiction altogether or have only made passing comments of minimal literary value on it. It is my argument in this thesis that critics should make an attempt to anchor works of fiction from Africa firmly within the societies the writers are writing about. Were such studies to be made more often, some of the now familiar and outrageous statements concerning the presence of African religious beliefs in African literature would hardly arise.

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It is customary to say "thank you" to certain people after the writing of a thesis. To the members of my examining committee, I wish to express my sincere thanks for their patience in reading my thesis and for their judicious critical comments. To my supervisor, Professor S.H. Arnold, I say thank you most sincerely for helping me study at the University of Alberta.

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To my darling wife, Maika, what a consolation to know that you are always there to guide me through so many dark alleys. The sun is bound to shine on us too one day. Finally, to Simolen, our sweet little daughter "born in exile." She brought so many memorable smiles to us at the height of so many depressing moments; it is my hope that she'll one day take over the struggle where I seem to be losing a battle.

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I. WHY TRADITIONAL RELIGION?

Western literature is so deeply steeped in Christianity that it would be almost impossible if not totally absurd to think of it outside the realm of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions. The Bible has continued from time immemorial to serve as an inexhaustible source of influence on countless writers. We see examples of this influence from the creation myths of Genesis through several other books of the Bible (Job, Proverbs, the Gospels, to name only a few), on the works of Dante, Shakespeare, and many other writers, through the Romantics (Novalis, Chateaubriand, Wordsworth and numerous others) and on to the twentieth century authors such as Eliot, Mann, Mauriac and many, many more. Indeed, the Bible's influence has been so all-pervasive that it reverberates quite strongly even in the works of an important personality of the Enlightenment era like Voltaire and of atheists like Sartre and Brecht -- writers who have either ridiculed or rejected religion altogether.

Beyond Western literature which has so often been mistakenly referred to as "World" or "Universal" literature, other literatures continue to record different versions of human drama by drawing sustenance from religions other than Judeo-Christianity. Caribbean and Latin American literatures are such examples. In these regions, Catholicism, the predominant denomination, has fused so intimately with those resilient vestiges of New World Indian religions and those of traditional African religions which survived the Middle Passage that a syncretism has resulted. One can cite, for example, Voodoo in Haiti, Santería in Cuba, Macumba and Candomblé in Brazil. Is it not practically imposssible to purge Macumba from the impresssive works of the Brazilian writer, Jorge Amado, or Voodoo from the works of such writers as Jacques Roumain and Stephan Alexis, members of the Haitian "Ecole Indigéniste" (a movement formed in the 1930's to protest against the American occupation of Haiti and to express the peasant reality of the Haitian society)? It is equally ludicrous to try to appreciate such writers as Alejo Carpentier and Nicolás Guillén from Cuba, the Jamaican Claude McKay or the Nobel-Prize-winning

Colombian writer, Gabriel García Márquez, to name only a few, without taking into account their manipulation of those actual marvels and extraordinary details of the day-to-day religious occurences of the life of the peasants and the slum-dwellers in their societies. The peasant and slum societies which figure in the works of these writers, like all such societies the world over, are immersed in traditional religion. Because a writer of no lesser stature than Gabriel García Márquez has so strongly defended the use of peasant life as a source of literary inspiration, I am tempted to quote him here in full. In a long dialogue with the famous Peruvian novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa, he said:

> I believe that particularly in *Cien anos de soledad*, I am a realist writer, because I believe that in Latin America everything is possible, everything is real. There is a technical problem in that the writer finds difficulty in transcribing real events in Latin America because no one would believe them in a book.... We live surrounded by these fantastic and extraordinary things and still some writers insist on recounting to us immediate realities of no real importance. I believe that we have to work, investigating language and technical forms of narration so that the entire fantastic reality of Latin America might form parts of our books and so that Latin American literature might in fact correspond to Latin American life where most extraordinary things happen everyday.... We Latin American writers, when we sit down to write, instead of accepting them as realities, enter into polemics and rationalize by saying: "This is impossible; what happens is this man is a lunatic," etc. We all start giving a series of explanations which falsify the Latin American reality. I believe what we should do is to promote it as a form of reality which can give something new to universal literature.[1]

What Márquez says about Latin American literature could to a considerable degree be said about West African literature in European languages. Even though one has to be careful not to give the impression that West African literature is as full of magical realism as Latin American literature, one should stress that it is very deeply informed and shaped by the cultural elements of the West African peoples. The most important of these elements is traditional religion. It "permeates into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it."[2] It is manifest in both the secular and the sacred, in the abstract and the concrete, in the visible and invisible aspects of life. Edward Kamau Brathwaite puts it more succinctly:

> A study of African culture reveals almost without question that it is based upon religion -- that, in fact, it is within the religious network that the entire culture resides.... In other words, starting from this particular religious focus, there is no separation between religion and philosophy, religion and society, religion

and art. Religion is the form or kernel of the culture.[3]

Is there any wonder then that African literature is so largely inspired and fed by traditional religion? It is such a backbone of African literature that several critics have voiced the complaint that African works of art tend to be mere anthropological explorations. How can it be otherwise since literary creativity is usually a reconstruction of the realities of a given society. Literary creativity would otherwise be divorced from the realities of a given society. For are we not dealing here with a basically oral society in which religion is part and parcel of every societal activity? The songs, stories, folktales, rituals and other ceremonies of a social, economic, or political nature are impregnated with religious elements.

The writer in Africa explores -- consciously or otherwise -- the ubiquitous theme of his people's religious beliefs. The Guinean writer Camara Laye is speaking for many of his African peers when he says

> ...je n'ai jamais séparé le monde visible de l'invisible. J'étais en Afrique, naturellement plongé dans ce monde spirituel, j'y suis resté en Europe comme en Afrique. Je ne puis entrevoir d'en sortir jamais. La mort même ne devra que m'y intégrer plus intimement.[4]

Like many other writers of the Negritude movement -- a movement incubated in the West Indies and hatched in Paris with the aim of opposing the French colonial policy of assimilation and of upholding the dignity of black cultural values -- Camara Laye has openly brandished traditional religion as one of the most important elements to have been rescued from the clutches of centuries of systematic European denigration.

Ousmane Silla summarizes the approach of the African writer of French expression to African religious systems well when he says that

> La conscience de race est axée sur la religion noire, sur l'âme noire ou plutôt sur une certaine qualité commune aux pensées et aux conduites des nègres. Aussi le noir qui revendique sa personalité voudra retrouver certains traits objectivement constatés dans les civilisations africaines.... Il sera un demi-prophète, un demi-dieu, un intermédiaire entre les ancêtres spiritualisés et les vivants.
>
> Ainsi la littérature noire se présente comme une littérature evangélique....[5]

As examples of what he calls "littérature evangélique," he analyzes the poetry of Leopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, the poetry and tales of Birago Diop of Senegal, the tales of Bernard Dadié of the Ivory Coast and the novels of Camara Laye of Guinea and of Mongo Beti of Cameroon. He comes to the conclusion that

> l'éducation traditionnelle africaine essentiellement religieuse a marqué d'une façon indubitable les premiers écrivains noirs africains de langue française; car le pays natal est resté cher au coeur de ces hommes.[6]

Even such a left-leaning writer as Mongo Beti whose attitude towards traditional religion and especially towards such traditional religious figures as the medicine man or the traditional priest is at best very lukewarm, still bows to the tremendous influence of religious beliefs on his people in his novels. For many Francophone African writers, returning to the sources of their ancestral religion is a sure way of thumbing their noses at the French policy of assimilation and its rejection of African customs and religious traditions.

Even though Francophone writers have in general taken their commitment to the cultural ways of their people to the level of an obsession, they are hardly the only ones to do so. Some writers from English-speaking Africa have stressed their indebtedness to the inspiration they get from going back to their people's cultures. Describing himself as an "ancestor worshipper," Chinua Achebe of Nigeria admits that one of his aims in writing is to show that African cultures have nothing to envy from Europe and that

> African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry, and above all, they had dignity.[7]

Whatever approach the writers adopt -- most Francophone writers defiantly sing their absolute trust in the religious ways of their people while their Anglophone counterparts on the whole choose a more subdued though still assertive way of renewing their faith in the cultures of their peoples -- it remains true that the works produced by African writers revolve mainly around traditional religion.

One would naturally expect that so much exuberance on the part of writers over their people's religious beliefs would provoke a similar reaction on the part of critics towards the different uses made of them in African literature. Unfortunately that does not seem to be the case. Critics seem content with a passing comment here and there on the all-pervasive nature of religious elements, but few so far seem willing to venture to open the door of ancestral shrines to penetrate the unplumbed mysteries surrounding the sacred groves where priests and medicine men sit communing with their ancestors. While writers seem totally captivated by the ways of their people, critics who should be striving to go beneath the surface of the works to explicate and analyze the reasons behind the abundant use of the religious elements, seem hesitant to fulfill that obligation.

My present work is a modest attempt to address that lacuna. Like the proverbial blind men who probed different parts of the elephant's body, I have merely touched a small portion of the enormous question of religion as a backbone of culture and its reflection in the literature of a section of Africa. This study lays no claim whatsoever to exhaustiveness. It is my hope, however, that it will serve as a useful background to the understanding of African literature. I am fully convinced that if we are to gain greater depth of insight into the way African writers, to borrow Thomas Knipp's apt phrase, "seek to re-establish the connection with the strong and restorative culture of Africa,"[1] of which traditional religion is an important pillar, more critical spotlights will have to be turned on the diverse literary uses of religion and its practitioners in Africa. We can perhaps borrow a leaf from Dennis Duerden's seminal work, *The Invisible Present: African Art and Literature*, in which he shows that African visual art and literature are inextricably linked one to the other. What he says about the usefulness of art to the understanding of African literature can equally be said about traditional religion in literature. He says that

> Just as the nonindustrial African societies do not regard their visual art as something to be considered separately from their poetry, music and dancing, so it is impossible to consider the work of modern African writers without some knowledge of all the other arts which form a background to their work.[2]

One can discover in the study of the religious elements of African cultures "the key to an

understanding of the thought and organization of African society and also to its oral literature and to its modern written literature."[10] If we strive to promote such useful background studies instead of shying away from them as most critics of African literature tend to do, we will be grafting a very healthy bud from African literature onto the huge tree of universal literature. This will be a way of making its fruits healthier and much more palatable to the whole human race.

I have chosen West Africa for convenience only. It is the part of Africa where literary production in English and French, the two dominant European languages, is highest. The subject of my study is enormous. That is why I have limited it to one genre only, the novel, although the other genres -- poetry, drama, the short story, and the popular literatures in these genres -- are called upon from time to time when they provoke interesting comparative analysis.

I am also aware that the literary view of traditional religion does not necessarily reflect an ethnographic authenticity, nor does it have to. Creative writers, unlike ethnographers, have the licence to distort reality to suit their own designs. As Leo Lowenthal once wrote,

> The creative writer is the intellectual per se, for whom objective source materials are merely an arbitrary arsenal of reference of which he makes use, if at all, according to his specifically esthetic aims.[11]

All I have attempted to do, therefore, is to analyze and explicate in literary terms with the help of some extra-literary information some of the uses which authors have made of a particular aspect of their culture and of those who enforce its laws. It has not been my aim to show how precisely or how poorly such and such an author has located a deity or an ancestor in the pantheon of his people. Such an approach would have taken me outside the domain of literature into such fields as Anthropology, Comparative Religion and Sociology, which fall beyond my competence and outside the scope of this work.

My choice of genre for study is also problematic. Unlike drama and poetry which have always formed an integral part of the oral traditions of Africa and are used

extensively in rituals and other festivities, the novel is a relative new-comer on the African literary scene. Written largely for consumption by a foreign audience -- at least that was the situation at the beginning when the number of educated Africans was much less than it is today -- the novel is the only genre "that has been totally imported and imposed over and above development from an indigenous pattern."[12] The first novels with Africa as a theme or setting were written by European travellers or administrators during the colonial period. As Mohamadou Kane says,

> Ce sont les "romanciers coloniaux ou colonialistes" qui devaient conférer de façon définitive les caractères durables au roman de cette époque, caractères que l'on retrouve jusque dans le roman africain moderne.[13]

One of the most consistent characteristics of the novels about Africa by Europeans is their approach to the age-old institutions of the African peoples of which traditional religion is a cornerstone. They served as a forum for a systematic bashing of the African way of life and especially of the African religious systems. Since the contemporary novel in Africa is an off-shoot of the colonial novel-- the African writer either endorses the views expressed by colonial writers (tutelage writers) or rejects them outright (protest writers)-- it seems reasonable to me to start this work by examining, albeit very briefly, traditional religion as seen by the colonial writers. The second part of the work looks at the first group of African writers, fresh products of missionary or early colonial schools, who express an overt admiration for Christianity while rejecting as barbaric the traditions of their own people. Janheinz Jahn refers to such writers rather pejoratively as producing a zöglingsliteratur : tutelage literature or the literature of good pupils. These willing accomplices of Christianity and colonialism were relatively few in number compared with the next generation of writers who react against the negative image of traditional religion in the works of the "good pupils" and in that of colonial writers by striving to show that African religious systems had an inherent dignity which was only destroyed by the marauding missionaries and their protectors, the colonial masters.

It was not easy selecting novels for this study since almost every novel written on or about Africa by an African or a European seems to touch in one way or another on traditional religion. I was reminded of the feeling of indecision Simon Mpondo had as he pondered over what authors or books to include in, and which to discard from his article "Provisional Notes on Literature and Criticism in Africa." He says that

> At times some choices seemed haphazard, and I found myself dealing with African writers as Prince Hamlet did the gravedigger, disregarding the earth, stones and rotten branches he throws out and picking a skull in order to lecture on it. Taken as a whole, however, all the choices serve their intended purpose.[14]

I have selected those works -- few though they are -- which I feel serve my purpose best. I did not feel that I needed to examine more books to prove my point. Indeed, as Todorov has said,

> We actually deal with a relatively limited number of cases, from them we deduce a general hypothesis, and we verify this hypothesis by other cases, correcting (or rejecting) it as need be. Whatever the number of phenomena (of literary works, in this case) studied, we are never justified in extrapolating universal laws from them; it is not the quantity of observations, but the logical coherence of a theory that finally matters. As Karl Popper writes:
>
> > It is far from obvious, from a logical point of view, that we are justified in inferring universal statements from singular ones, no matter how numerous; for any conclusion drawn in this way may always turn out to be false: no matter how many instances of white swans we have observed, this does not justify the conclusion that all swans are white.
>
> On the other hand, a hypothesis which is based on the observation of a limited number of swans but which also informs us that their whiteness is the consequence of an organic characteristic would be perfectly legitimate. To return from swans to novels, this general scientific truth applies not only to the study of genres, but also to that of a writer's entire oeuvre, or to that of a specific period, etc.[15]

To make my work more clear and to give the reader advance knowledge of my manner of presentation, I have divided the study into the following chapters.

Chapter Two is a brief survey of the colonial novel and its approach to the age-old institutions of Africa. It has not been my intention here to analyze in any detail any particular novel of the period. Rather I have laid stress on the general attitude about African religious systems shared by European writer and reader alike. Whether written in English, French, Spanish or Portuguese, the novels of the period show a remarkable consistency in

their view of traditional religion as a source of evil in Africa. They all clothe it in a litany of negative attributes such as naive, primitive, barbaric, infantile, bloodthirsty and many such expressions which point to the familiar stereotypical attitudes so often heard in the Western world about Africa.

Chapter Three deals with the novels produced by the first generation of African writers, fresh graduates of missionary and colonial schools who were taught to acclaim the ways of their masters as a liberating influence on their tradition-oriented people. When they did not openly advocate total collaboration with the European, they scarcely hid their admiration for his military and missionary exploits. The works of these writers can hardly be called novels in the strict sense of the word, rather they are works of ethnography thinly veiled as fiction. They are usually very long on descriptions of quaint culture likely to interest European readers and very short on characterization, for example. I have chosen for special consideration in this category a novel by David Ananou entitled *Le fils du fétiche*.

Chapter Four takes us into the era of protest literature when African writers are reasserting the inherent dignity of traditional religion. The writers of the Negritude movement are particularly loud in their attempt to rehabilitate the cultural values of their people which colonial logic claimed were valueless even to the people who had used them for centuries. Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* seems to me to be one of the best works from French-speaking Africa to hover around the theme of traditional religion with an intensity bordering on an obsession.

Chapter Five looks at *Things Fall Apart*, a novel by one of the best writers from English-speaking Africa, Chinua Achebe, who, for reasons of objectivity, does not take his adhesion to the ways of his people as uncritically as did many writers of the Negritude persuasion.

In Chapter Six, the Conclusion, I have reiterated my conviction that if African literature is going to be more fully understood and appreciated, critics are going to have to

carry out more detailed background studies. If such studies are made, the controversy that has raged in critical circles over, for instance, the validity of cultural elements -- of which traditional religion is an integral part-- in African life and literature will not arise.

A. NOTES

[1]Quoted by James Irish in his article "Magical Realism: A Search for Caribbean and Latin American Roots," *The Literary Half-Yearly*, XI,2(July 1970), p.132.

[2]Mbiti, John. *African Religions and Philosophy*. (London: Heinemann, 1969), p.1.

[3]Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature," *Daedalus*, vol.103(Spring 1974), p.74.

[4]Quoted by Ousmane Silla in his article "La religion, source d'inspiration poétique et littéraire négro-africaine d'expression française," *Présence Francophone*, No. 2(Printemps 1971), p.69.

[5]Ousmane Silla, "La religion, source d'inspiration poétique et littéraire négro-africaine d'expression française," Op.cit., p.53.

[6]ibid., p.68.

[7]Achebe, Chinua. "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation," *Nigeria Magazine*, 81(June 1964), p.157.

[8]Knipp, Thomas. "Traditional Religion in Modern West African Poetry," *Ba Shiru*, 10,1(1979), p.6.

[9]Duerden, Dennis. *The Invisible Present: African Art and Literature*. (New York / Evanston / San Francisco / London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), p. ix.

[10]ibid., p.13.

[11]Lowenthal, Leo. "The Sociology of Literature" in W. Schramm, ed. *Communication in Modern Society*. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1948), p.85.

[12]Dathorne, O.R. *The Black Mind: A History of African Literature*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p.143.

[13]Kane, Mohamadou. "Naissance du roman africain francophone," *African Arts/Arts Africains*, II,2(Winter 1969), p.56.

[14]Mpondo, Simon. "Provisional Notes on Literature and Criticism in Africa," *Présence Africaine*, 78,ii(1971), pp.118-9.

[15]Todorov. *The Fantastic*. Transl. by Richard Howard (Cleveland and London: Case Western Research University Press, 1973), p.4.

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II. THE COLONIAL NOVELIST'S VIEW OF TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGION

The fascination which the Western world has always had for Africa and for anything African goes back into the obscurity of time. One just needs to examine the oral and written literatures of Europe from Antiquity to date to see how much Africa has "remained a field for the free play of European fantasy."[1] One of the most important cultural elements which has always intrigued, fascinated and appalled the Western mind is traditional religion. Among the numerous excuses used by Europeans to enslave the African was one which claimed that Africans were "savages," whose religious beliefs were sheer superstitions and as such, it was divine providence that christians enslaved them. To give scriptural sanction to such claims, the pro-slavers relied on such sections of the Old Testament as Leviticus 22:44-46 in which divine dispensation is given to the Jews to possess slaves. The west coast of Africa was typecast as "The White man's Grave." It was said to be a place "so pestilential that it could only benefit Africans to remove them to more wholesome lands."[2]

Much later in the nineteenth century as science gained ascendancy over trade in humans and as European travellers began to bring an increasing number of fascinating stories about the "primitive" races of the world to the European public, interest in the cultural elements of Africa became more and more pressing. Archaeological discoveries of the age, Darwin's theory of evolution and the European interest in acquiring colonies, helped fuel studies of cultures other than those of Europe.

The great debates surrounding the merits and demerits of "primitive" cultures, the role and obligation of the "superior" races of the world to "civilize" the "primitives" and bring them on their knees to the altar of divine salvation, took place mainly among scientists, missionaries and other intellectuals. However, because of the increasing access to literacy, a growing number of ordinary people were very anxious to read more about the people of the so-called exotic lands with their strange but fascinating cultures.

It was an opportunity for the writer of popular fiction to come in and help quench the thirst for sensational happenings that were rumoured to occur in distant lands inhabited by very unusual people. A spurt of cheap pamphlets known in Britain as the "penny dreadfuls" flourished as writers strived to give the scientific theories of the day creative and imaginative life. The religious practices of "primitive" peoples -- witchcraft practices, sorcery, black magic, voodoo, etc.-- became customary material in such literature. Africa and all that was African in these pamphlets, were entirely drawn from what Neil V. Rosenberg has rightly termed a "single reservoir of exaggerated beliefs -- stereotypes."[3]

What the European public was fed was an ethnocentric literature totally lacking in an understanding of, or sympathy for African cultural values. As G.D. Killam says,

> Most of these novels convey the general belief that African society, religious and political institutions are naive, and that this primitiveness justifies the presence of the white man.[4]

Africa to many Europeans became the Africa of Rider Haggard's adventure stories in South Africa, or the desert waste-land peopled by naive, superstitious people as depicted very graphically by Conan Doyle in *The Tragedy of the Koroska*, or the strange naked dancing creatures in Buchan's *Prester John*. So deeply engraved was the image of African religious systems as barbaric and badly in need of the civilizing influence of Christianity that by the late nineteenth century in Britain alone, it

> was found in children's books, in Sunday school tracts, in the popular press. Its major affirmations were the 'common knowledge' of the educated class. Thereafter when new generations of explorers and administrators went to Africa, they went with a prior impression of what they would find. Most often, they found it, and their writing in turn confirmed the older image -- or at most altered it only slightly.[5]

Those who inherited this negative image of Africa and its people and used it to their greatest advantage were, of course, the missionaries. I reserve a much fuller discussion of their role in the next chapter but suffice it to say that they came to Africa convinced that its traditional religions were the work of the Devil himself. The German explorer Leo Frobenius said that before he ever visited Africa, "a great light of the church" had declared that "the 'niggers' have no souls, but are burnt-out husks of men." He had read in a Berlin

newspaper that Africa was a place governed entirely by "insensible fetish."[6] The missionaries therefore saw the African as the unrelieved model of the "fallen man." They saw it as their duty not only to convert him to christian ways but also to make him give up the ways of his people which were being so graphically detailed in popular writing.

What the popular writers were doing, however, was merely rummaging among the jumble of unproven and unproveable pseudo-scientific theories that were being tossed about in scientific circles and giving such theories a life of their own. But neither the missionary nor his flock would have understood had anyone questioned the authenticity of what they were being fed. To them it was the truth and nothing but that. Thus the biological and anthropological fetters that were being wrapped around the African's feet were noisily dragged onto the literary arena. This was to be expected, of course, as literature generally reflects the history of the period.

Some of these writers, Conan Doyle, René Cailler, Sarah Lee and many others, were adventurers in quest of excitement away from the dreary life of Victorian England or -- in the case of the French -- to escape from the turmoil spun by short-lived monarchies and revolutions. They wrote mainly travel diaries with detailed scenes of ritual festivities. However, as the European grip on Africa became firmer, a number of colonial administrators began to write novels and short stories about Africa. Such writers number in their hundreds but for the purposes of this study I have mentioned in passing one or two works each by Joyce Cary, the best known of the English colonial writers, and by René Maran, a black West Indian in the French colonial service.

Joyce Cary worked for the British colonial administration in Nigeria and wrote novels based on that country. However, his works show a total lack of understanding of the traditional religious systems of the people he wrote about. For instance, in *The African Witch* he shows characteristic disdain for, and total ignorance of African religious beliefs. He has been severely castigated for this by an anthropologist, Geoffrey Parrinder, who accuses him of a lack of "realism" in the depiction of the witch-figure in

that novel. Parrinder says that

> ...Joyce Cary has given a lifelike picture of a woman who lays a spell on her opponents and paralyses the work of the government. But, whatever her charms, this lady is no witch. For she is a known, public figure, who works conscious magic to the furtherance of her ends, and she has none of the characteristics of the true witch.
>
> Joyce Cary is a serious novelist who had worked in Africa, and one expects more from serious writers.[7]

Even though one may defend Cary's artistic licence which enables him to create any type of character he chooses, Parrinder's contention is understandable. For all his writings on Nigeria, Cary remains totally ignorant of the religious ways of the people. His depiction of the Nigerian character in *Mr Johnson* motivated the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe to embark on the road to a literary career. When asked why he decided to start writing, Achebe said that

> One of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary's novel set in Nigeria, *Mr Johnson*, which was praised so much, and it was clear to me that this was a most superficial picture of -- not only the country, but even the Nigerian character and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside.[9]

Most colonial writers convey through their characters the opinion that African religions base themselves on fear and superstition which are exploited by wily witchdoctors and fetish priests. Christianity is shown to be the key to the salvation of "primitive" peoples. The native characters are made to marvel at the wonders wrought by whites and those of them who embrace Christianity and reject their own religion are shown to be superior to their compatriots who adhere to their traditional cultural values.

The colonial writers who misrepresented African traditional religions were not only those with a white skin. René Maran is an excellent example of the fact that a black writer did not necessarily understand or appreciate the cultures of African peoples. Maran was a Martinican who served in the French colonial service in Ubangi-Shari (present day Central African Republic). Even though many black writers and intellectuals, especially those of the Negritude persuasion, tend to consider him the precursor of their movement, Maran was in many ways a man so imbued with French ways that he identified himself totally with

France. He pledged his total allegiance to French cultural values during his early days in Africa when he remarked that

> For now, with a French heart I feel that I am on the soil of my ancestors, ancestors of whom I disapprove because I have neither their primitive mentality nor their tastes, but they are ancestors nevertheless.[9] (my emphasis).

Even though his novel *Batouala* and its sequel *Djouma, chien de brousse* were the first works of their kind to attack the abuses of the French colonial system, they fail totally to analyze in any sympathetic way the local customs, especially the religious rituals of the people of Ubangi-Shari. *Batouala* earned for the writer the coveted Prix Goncourt in 1921 but opened the door for scathing attacks on him by other colonial administrators. He was forced into early retirement mainly because of the controversy his views generated in the French colonial system. There is no doubt that Maran's works are a serious indictment of the brutal colonial set-up and the exploitative nature of the companies which brought only misery, starvation and death to the Ubangui-Shari people. However, when it comes to the traditional religious beliefs of the people, Maran is just as ignorant and as critical and as disdainful of them as all other white colonial writers who made no attempt to understand the people over whom they ruled. For example, the people's religious rites of passage in *Batouala*, a vital ceremony for the initiation of the young into the mainstream of society, are made to appear as nothing other than an excuse for sexual promiscuity. His descriptions of the cultural values of the Ubangui-Shari people are very reminiscent of the hostile approach adopted by such a racist writer as Pierre Loti, author of, among other works, *Roman d'un spahi*, set in Senegal.

Whether the work is written by an English or a French writer, its depiction of the traditional religious rituals of the African peoples is identical. Africans are shown to worship animals, trees, rivers, and other such objects of worship which appear abominable and incomprehensible to Europeans. The African is portrayed as extremently gullible. His stupidity is easily exploited by wily local priests and kings who capitalize on his fear of and belief in superstition to gain his unflincing loyalty. Christianity is stressed

as the only way of rescuing the incredulous natives from the stranglehold of paganism and from the tyranny of their own rulers. As Brian Street has said with reference to the British, "The superiority of the British political system was assumed to be inextricably bound up with the Christian religion."[10]

The missionaries, needless to say, applauded the depiction of traditional religious beliefs in popular literature as bloodthirsty and savage and badly in need of the enlightenment of Christianity. Is there any wonder then that the very first missionary-trained Africans, fed on such literature, were made to sing the praises of Europe and of Christianity while attacking as unwholesome the tribal ways of their own people? Those among them who were endowed with creative imaginations wrote pamphlets and novels in the style of their colonial or missionary masters. Predictably they launched assaults on the traditional religions of their peoples and exalted Christianity and colonialism. Those writers are the subject of my next chapter.

A. NOTES

[1]Hammond, Dorothy & Alta Jablow. *The Myth of Africa.* (New York: The Library of Social Science, 1977), p.13.

[2]ibid., p.25.

[3]Rosenberg, Neil V. *Stereotype and Tradition: White Folklore about Blacks.* (Indiana University: University Microfilms, 1970), p.8.

[4]Killam, G.D. *Africa in English Fiction 1874-1939.* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968), pp.x-xi.

[5]Curtin, Philip D. *The Image of Africa; British Ideas and Actions.* (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), p.vi.

[6]Quoted by E. Bolaji Idowu in his article "The Predicament of the Church in Africa" in C.G. Baeta, ed. *Christianity in Tropical Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp.425-6.

[7]Parrinder, Geoffrey. *Witchcraft: European and African.* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p.131.

[8]Interview with Lewis Nkosi in Dennis Duerden & Cosmo Pieterse, eds. *African Writers Talking.* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p.4.

[9]Milbury-Steen, Sarah L. *European and African Stereotypes in Twentieth Century Fiction.* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1981), p.51.

[10]Street, Brian V. *The Savage in Literature: Representations of "Primitive" Society in English Fiction 1858-1920.* (London & Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p.138.

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III. THE LITERATURE OF TUTELAGE: TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN EARLY AFRICAN LITERATURE

In the beginning, the written word in Africa belonged to two cosmopolitan and proselytizing religious systems -- Islam and Christianity -- and its dissemination was also fostered by the spread of these religions. The relations of the Arabs to Africa are much more ancient than those which Africa has maintained with Europe, and the Arabic script spread with the triumph of Islam over North Africa, later penetrating into the kingdoms of West Africa and spreading as far east as the coasts of East Africa. It is not my intention here to discuss the spread of the written word in the Arabic script. My interest is on the form of writing which came much later from Europe: the Roman script.

As in the Dark Ages in Europe when Christian monks and teachers spread the Roman script thereby profoundly changing the nature of the oral cultures of the day, so also did Western literacy begin in Africa through the efforts of missionaries.[1] To propagate the news of salvation embodied in the Bible, the missionaries realized that they would have to translate the Bible into indigenous languages for the inhabitants to understand. This necessitated the building of schools. As Daniel Kunene says,

> ... the Bible means readers, and readers mean schools, and schools mean teachers, and teachers can only be trained in places specially designed for that object; and if the Bible must be read, people must be taught to read it. If missionary education communicated no other power than the ability to read the Bible, it would still justify itself.[2]

The first graduates of the missionary schools were preachers first and teachers second. They mounted the pulpit to extol the virtues of Christianity and condemn their own cultures. A glaring example of a preacher-teacher who is absolutely hostile towards African religious beliefs is John Goodcountry in Achebe's *Arrow of God*. He calls the people's belief in the python ludicrous and instigates Ezeulu's son, Oduche to kill a python with the tragic consequences that follow.

Those early African writers took up the missionary cause in their works and launch an all-out assault on traditional religion. One can find excellent examples of such works

among South African writers who were patronized by the numerous missionary groups that settled there in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A vibrant and robust literature in the indigenous languages the like of which was never known in West Africa developed and flourished in South Africa.[3] The writers of this literature were, needless to say,

> not only moralists but their moral teachings were so contrary to their native social milieu, that they saw evil where none existed before -- they were alienated from the rest (the great majority) of their compatriots, but even more serious, they were alienated from themselves. Many of them wrote long sermons under the guise of novels, in which characters were mostly illustrations of the moral lesson. Mostly characters were either christian converts and good, or non-christians and bad.[4]

The most gifted of these writers, Thomas Mofolo, who wrote among other works the controversial and now famous *Chaka*, epitomizes the hostility of the early writers towards the ways of their people. In one of his works, *Moeti*, for instance, he sees pre-Christianity Africa as "clothed in darkness, pitch black darkness in which all the things of darkness were done" and in which "the tribes ate each other." He considers the initiation rites of his people as sheer pagan rituals that teach obscenity and whose celebrations lead to excessive drinking and much bloodshed.[5]

Janheinz Jahn has termed the works of writers like Mofolo as zöglingsliteratur: the literature of good pupils.

> Everything European is from the outset assumed to be "superior," "progressive," and better than the "bad," "bloodthirsty," "savage," "heathen," African traditions. The European commands and instructs, the African obeys in action and conforms in thought.[6]

In West Africa too, education was in the hands of the missionaries who destroyed much of the inherited, traditional, cultural and especially religious values and institutions which, as we have already seen, were held to be manifestations of the Devil. Their task was made much easier by the collaboration of the first writers who were mere echoes of missionary propaganda. They were made to give copious thanks to Europe for bringing them "civilization" and Christianity. Dennis Chukude Osadebay of Nigeria, for example, wrote a poem entitled "Young Africa's Thanks" in which he expressed gratitude to British

imperial presence in Africa.

> Thank you,
> Sons and daughters of Britannia.
> You gave me hospitals,
> You gave me schools,
> Easy communications too,
> Your Western civilization.[7]

Other poets such as Grispin George and Jacob Stanley Davies in Sierra Leone[8] made extensive use of the Christian hymnal, of the Book of Common Prayer and of the Bible in general in their poetry. Needless to stress that they saw African traditional religions as an aberration.

The reaction of the novelists in West Africa was very similar to that of the poets. Let us take the case of English-speaking writers, for example. The beginning of the novel form is to be found in two works by two Ghanaians, E. Casely-Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* and R.E. Obeng's *Eighteenpence*. *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) deals with the author's desire to rediscover the true path leading him back to his people's religious fervour. Despite great efforts on his part, he succeeds only in revealing his deep reverence for the West and for Christianity. The action of the story takes the reader from West Africa to London back to West Africa and even to the underworld. It can hardly be called a novel at all as the author uses it as an excuse to propound on a hodge-podge of ideas on Christianity in Africa, on education for the African and on African religion. Even though the protagonist Kwamankara returns from London to the Gold Coast (today's Ghana) determined to cast off Christianity and go out in search of the religious beliefs of his own people, it is clear that he himself is quite unsure of the effectiveness of those practices. The author takes pains to make us identify the Fanti God, Nyiakrapon with the Christian God.

R.E. Obeng's *Eighteenpence* (1943) is artistically much superior to *Ethiopia Unbound* but there still runs through it all the same note of apology for African religious beliefs which the author, consciously or not, considers inferior to Christianity. Neither work qualifies as a novel in the strict sense of the word. They are, like similar works of

the time, mere treatises of an "anthropological" nature in which the writers are keen on analyzing the culture of their people. No attention is paid to dramatic conflict or tone or characterization and the few characters that exist are mere stereotypes.[9]

The early African writer in French also echoed the praise of the French colonial system and of Christianity while denigrating the traditional values of his own people. The first African novel in French was Bakary Diallo's *Force Bonté* (1926). It merely sang the splendours of France, of the French military might and of the righteousness of colonial rule. Paul Hazoumé's *Doguicimi* (1938), an African *Salammbô*, is a careful documentation of life in the court of the Kingdom of Dahomey in the early part of the nineteenth century. What comes out of this massive and well-documented work is a picture of a people wading in religious ignorance and brutality, with kings and fetish priests terrorizing the entire population. The people are only saved through the timely arrival of Christianity and French civilization. *Doguicimi* is a good example of a work which, even though it is written by an African, an évolué, nevertheless sees the African society from an entirely European perspective.

One novel, however, deserves closer attention. It fits perfectly into that category of novels referred to with contempt by Janheinz Jahn as "the literature of tutelage." I am referring to David Ananou's *Le fils du fétiche*, an obsessively proselytizing work in which Christianity and the French civilizing mission are put on a pedestal while the traditional ways of the people receive a systematic bashing. It is in West African literature in French and English what much of the vernacular literature is in South African writing. Even though chronologically one cannot really consider it as the work of an early writer -- it was published in 1955 -- I am dealing with it here as a way of giving greater coherence to those novels which are noted for their outright assaults on traditional religion.

The preface to the novel enables the reader to put his finger on the pulse of things to come. The author's gratitude to the "civilizing" nature of the French system is very eloquently put as he praises the generosity of the French who have brought enlightenment

to an Africa that is still wallowing in the mud of dark deeds.

> Nous rendons hommage aux Puissances Civilisatrices qui ont accompli et continuent d'accomplir de grandes oeuvres en Afrique. Nous leur demandons de nous connaître et de nous faire mieux connaître. Ainsi peut-être en arriveraient-elles à nous mieux aimer davantage et à se faire mieux aimer de nous.[10]

Ananou strongly feels and hopes that after his novel has been read, the whites would understand the African better and possibly forgive him "ses travers et que l'on serait plus indulgent à son endroit, ne serait-ce que par égard pour l'humanité qui est en lui"(p.7).

The novel, which is in reality an ethnographic tract coated with a heavy religious veneer, opens predictably enough with a virulent attack on polygamy and its evil effects on the family and on the society as a whole. By embarking on this overflogged debate, Ananou is merely giving a place in fiction to the views of many of the first missionaries in Africa. As J.B. Webster puts it,

> From the first moment professional missionaries from Europe and America set foot in Africa, they were confronted with the question of whether or not the marriage customs associated with polygamy were consistent with membership in the Christian church. A majority came to the conclusion that they were not.[11]

Many African missionaries broke ranks with their main churches over the eviction of, or refusal to baptize polygamists. Many of them then formed their own churches in which they crowned themselves "prophets." Such churches are found all over West Africa but more so in Nigeria where they are known as the "Aladura" churches. Many of these "prophets" were, and still are themselves polygamists and they saw no reason to reject anyone from church just because he had more than one wife. Some of them gave as a legitimate justification for their endorsement of polygamy the fact that many of the Patriachs in the Old Testament were themselves polygamists.

If I have lingered a little on this issue of polygamy, it is because it forms an important part of the novel under consideration. Indeed, David Ananou opens his novel with a resounding rejection of polygamy. He draws for us a portrait of a polygamist which would no doubt have made his missionary masters nod in approval. It would seem that Ananou must have taken more than a passing interest in the debate that raged and still

rages in many church circles over polygamy and there is no doubt where his sympathies lie.

The action of *Le fils du fétiche* takes place in the small village of Séva, in southern Togo. As the story opens, we are brought face-to-face with Sodji, a villager who is endowed with two shrewish wives who, instead of giving him the joy and happiness which he always imagined polygamists had, have become quite a thorn in his side. From a hard-working member of his society, Sodji is reduced to a slow-thinking husk of a man.

> En effet, depuis cinq ans que Sodji trônait au milieu de ses deux femmes, jamais il n'avait eu la paix avec lui, jamais son content de sommeil. Chaque semaine, c'était sous son toit, des scènes de jalousie, des compliments tournant à l'aigre, des recours à la répression ou à la violence (pp.10-11).

What other course of action is open to the poor man except the bottle and thoughts of ending it all with the rope? Several times he is heard to lament alone hidden away in his hut:

> Qu'ai-je fait aux dieux et aux fétiches des ancêtres pour mériter un tel châtiment? Comment pourrai-je arriver à sortir d'une situation aussi pénible que la mienne? Je ne suis pourtant pas le seul ni le premier polygame dans ce pays! Comment se fait-il que j'ai toujours maille à partir avec mes épouses? (p.11)

It is only when he finally decides to repudiate his wives and children -- a very unconvincing act for an African living in such a rural milieu -- and marry his childhood sweetheart, that he finds a semblance of fleeting happiness. Unfortunately for him his wife is struck with the most dreaded of all afflictions for an African woman, sterility. The author then seizes this opportunity to put the story on hold and lecture the reader at boring lengths on the stupidity of the traditional ways of curing a woman of barrenness. To him, traditional medicinemen are just a gallery of frauds who confuse and take advantage of the superstitious beliefs of the incredulous villagers. The homes of the medicinemen are shown to be extremely dirty:

> Les trois amis entrèrent dans une case noire qui n'avait d'autre ouverture que la porte. Une odeur âcre, provenant de la décomposition des victimes et aliments, les saisit à la gorge (p.28).

There is a strong suggestion throughout the story that medicinemen murder their victims; a

suggestion which Joyce Cary or Pierre Loti or any other colonial writer would find very comforting.

After rambling on and on about the ineffectiveness of traditional medicine, the author takes us back to the main story and we see Sodji and his grief-stricken wife seeking the good counsel of, who else but a French doctor working in a clean hospital with crosses hanging from the walls? As one of the African characters is made to say of the French doctor: "Il n'est pas comme nos charlatans que vous nourrissez princièrement pour vous avoir abreuvés des mensognes." (p.33). Having brought the hero and his wife out of the stench of the decomposing rubbish of the medicinemen's huts, Ananou places them blinking and astonished in the impeccably clean wards of the French hospital. It is another opportunity for him to extol the ways of the French and the magnanimity of Christianity which has brought so much to the black world. He holds the African responsible for most of the disasters that strike him:

> La mortalité enfantile accuse un pourcentage assez élevé dans quelques-unes de nos contrées. L'ignorance des mamans africaines n'y est-elle pas pour quelquechose? (p.41).

When he again takes us back to the main story, we see that the protagonist's wife has finally been cured of barrenness and she gives birth to a healthy baby boy who is named Dansou or "le fils du fétiche." Even though Dansou takes over the central role in the story, he is seen only occasionally as the author's main aim seems to be to explicate some of the cultural elements of his society and how far short they fall of Christianity and the ways of the French. He diverts from the story to explain in great detail the rites of passage, traditional religious rites and ceremonies associated with the birth of twins, with betrothal, with funeral celebrations. The author's biases come out loud and clear as he strives to make us believe that the numerous religious practices of his people are cruel, brutal and bloodthirsty and lack the dignity and respect which Christianity accords similar celebrations.

As a way of turning his back completely on the traditional religious ways of his people, the author later removes Dansou and his family from their traditional milieu (equated with all that is horrible) to a christian dominated environment in Sekondi in the neighbouring country of the Gold Coast (today's Ghana) where they finally "see the light" as they bow to the call from the Lord and become christians.

Le fils du fétiche operates on two levels: first, there is the author's avowed aim spelt out in the preface, which is that the white reader would show compassion to his black "brother" once he has come to understand the African's private life as exposed in this novel. Second, the author strongly indicts traditional religious beliefs and practices as being entirely responsible for what he sees as a state of lethargy in which the African is incarcerated. Such fetters can only be cast away through the enlightening and liberating effects of the Bible. That is why all in the novel that is christian is good and all that is African is seen as sly, treacherous, bloodthirsty, dirty and decaying.

Even though I refer to *Le fils du fétiche* as a novel, it can hardly be called that at all. Ananou's attempt at fiction is a mere tract on social anthropology. Like many of the early attempts at novel writing in Africa, this one too is a simple way of delving into the cultural life of Africa although this time the author has as his aim to expose the shortcomings of his people's ways while strongly recommending Christianity as an alternative. One wonders if the strong evangelizing message is not a way of gaining favours of the missionaries, owners of the few printing presses of the day, without whose blesssings works of this nature would not have been published. (In fact, *Le fils du fétiche* was published by a Catholic publishing house in Paris called "Nouvelles Editions Latines".) It fails as a work of art also because its didactic intents are too obvious. The characters are mere stereotypes who wander in and out of scenes for no other reason than to enable the author to denounce an aspect of traditional life or praise a refreshing christian alternative. Thus, the characters remain basically undeveloped especially the women who never really come to life at all.

On the whole, *Le fils du fétiche* is "heavily over-written and its stylistic devices are exaggeratedly artificial."[12] Ananou lacks the artistic skill of such writers as Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara or Ahmadou Kourouma who can render African speech patterns into English or French with truly astounding beauty. Ananou's literary pretensions pale by comparison and the reader is left wondering whether the author is really sincere about what he says of traditional religion. Is he really convinced that the traditional religious ways of his people are as horrible as he wants us to believe? If he is, why such a fascination with describing them in such detail? His arguments sound false and half-hearted. He seems to know more about and fear the religious ways of his people than he does Christianity which he professes to follow.

One should stress that by the 1950's when *Le fils du fétiche* was published, the dominant mood of the African writer was to reject Christianity and the colonial policies, especially the French colonial policy of assimilation, and to reassert African cultural values. David Ananou was thus at the tail-end of the literature of compromise as the predominant tendency was turning from acceptance or silent protest to vocal and increasingly militant writing, especially in French colonial Africa.

A. NOTES

[1]Obiechina, E.N. "Growth of Written Literature in English-Speaking West Africa." *Présence Africaine*, No.66(2e trimestre 1968), p.67.

[2]Kunene, Daniel P. "Background to the South African Vernacular Author and His Writing," in Daniel P. Kunene and Randal A. Kirsch, *The Beginnings of South African Vernacular Literature*, (Printed at the University of California, Los Angeles. For the Literature Committee of the African Studies Association, 1967), p.3.

[3]Numerous excellent studies are being increasingly done on the venacular literature of South Africa, most notably Albert Gerard's seminal works *Four African Literature: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic.* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1971) and *African Language Literatures: An Introduction to the Literary History of Sub-Saharan Africa.* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press; 1981).

[4]Kunene, Daniel P., op.cit., p.8.

[5]ibid., p.9.

[6]Jahn, Janheinz. *A History of Neo-African Literature.* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p.89.

[7]Quoted by Janheinz Jahn in *A History of Neo-African Literature.* op.cit., p.91.

[8]Palmer, Eustace. "The Development of Sierra Leone Writing," in Bruce King & Kolawole Ogungbesan, eds.*A Celebration of Black and African Writing*, (Zaria & Oxford: Ahmadu Bello University Press and Oxford University Press, 1975), p.247.

[9]Dathorne, O.R. *The Black Mind*, op.cit., p.143.

[10]Ananou, David. *Le fils du fétiche*, (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1955) Further references are to this edition and appear in parenthesis in the text.

[11]Webster, J.B. "Attitudes and Policies of the Yoruba African Churches Towards Polygamy," in C.G. Baeta, ed. *Christianity in Tropical Africa.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.224.

[12]Blair, Dorothy S. *African Literature in French.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.203.

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IV. RESCUING TRADITIONAL RELIGION: THE CASE OF CAMARA LAYE IN *L'Enfant noir*

The growth of a racial and cultural consciousness among Blacks (African and non-African alike), especially in France, was prompted mainly by the participation of Blacks in the First and Second World Wars. The increasing number of Blacks in Paris and their involvement in Marxist organizations led to vocal opposition to the French colonial policy of assimilation. Racial and cultural pride gave rise to the formation in Paris of the Negritude movement spearheaded by the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, by Leon Damas of French Guyana and by Leopold Senghor from Senegal. As a movement, Negritude has been so analyzed, dissected, studied, vilified, glorified and commented upon by so many critics that I hesitate to add to the confusion. What should be stressed is the fact that Negritude called upon Africans and Blacks in general to revive and reassert the cultural values of Black people the world over.

One of the resolutions adopted by the second conference of Black writers and artists held in Rome in 1959 -- the first having been held three years earlier in Paris -- called on the Black writers to become

> "l'expression vraie de la réalité de son peuple, longtemps obscurcie, deformée ou niée au cours de la période de colonisation."[1]

It is none other than Aimé Césaire, the renowned Martinican poet and politician, who aptly said of the effects of colonialism:

> Moi je parle de sociétés vidées d'elles-mêmes, de cultures piétinées, de terres confisquées, de religions assassinées, de magnificences artistiques anéanties, d'extraordinaires possibilités supprimées.[2]

The African writer was called upon to refute European colonial policies which, without exception, tried to de-africanize his traditional life by destroying art, religion and other cultural values of his people.

The African writer of the post-war period was thus radically different from his predecessor who, as we have already seen, wrote according to the dictates of missionaries or of patronizing colonial officials. The writer of the new generation began

to write a literature of protest. A word of caution should be inserted here, however, and it should be made quite clear that not all writers of the period were protest writers. As we have seen with David Ananou, the literature of compromise continued well into the 1950's.

In fact, the writer whose work I have chosen to analyze here, Camara Laye, has been accused by many of his contemporaries as being a lackey of French colonialism. There is no other French-speaking writer to my knowledge whose works have sparked as much controversy as have Laye's.[3] On its publication in 1953, *L'Enfant noir*[4] was hailed by numerous white critics as a great work of art. One of them enthusiastically said that

> The conscious and tranquil acceptance of the supernatural in ordinary life is what strikes us the most in this son of nature. Perhaps one of the most deplorable effects of material "progress" has been to deprive us of the sense through which primitive and simple people remain in communication with the invisible.[5]

L'Enfant noir reminded Europeans of what they had lost with technological development. It made them yearn for a return to the distant past, a past in which the noble savage reigned supreme. What was also most welcoming to them was the fact that Laye, unlike most of the African writers of the period, did not attack colonialism in his works. He was therefore considered a grateful African who made the French feel at ease with their role in Africa.

The African critic who was more politically oriented than his European counterpart saw in Laye's refusal to condemn colonialism a sure sign that he was in the pay of the oppressors of his people. For how else could they explain his obstinate silence over what the Cameroonian writer Mongo Beti calls "...la première réalité de l'Afrique Noire, je dirais même sa seule réalité profonde ... la colonisation et ce qui s'ensuit."?[6] It is Mongo Beti who led a violent attack on Laye for turning a blind eye on the realities of colonial rule in Africa preferring instead to dwell on what Brench calls "a naive account of happy, exotic life in the village."[7] The Senegalese writer Abdoulaye Sadji wondered if Laye had such a temperament that he could not see the shocking things French colonialism was

doing in Africa. He added that writers were needed to fight for freedom.[8]

Not every African writer felt such hostility towards Laye, however. Leopold Sedar Senghor, the arch-apostle of the Negritude movement, acclaimed Laye's work as conforming to the Negritude philosophy and its appeal for a return to the sources of African cultures for inspiration. Far from condoning colonialism, Senghor claimed, Laye was actually defying it.

> Painting the Negro-African world in the colours of childhood is the most suggestive way of condemning the capitalist world of the European West.[9]

Far from abating with time, however, the controversy over Laye's commitment or the lack thereof, seems to intensify as the book gains popularity and prominence in African literary circles. What has not been sufficiently looked into, it seems to me, is the author's use of what he himself has referred to as the most important drive behind his writing of *L'Enfant noir*: "l'omniprésence du mystère." Did he not declare that "mon ambition était de révéler tout ce qui, dans mes souvenirs relèvait du mystère"?[10]

Most critics invariably mention the writer's use of the traditional religious beliefs of his people but none of them has, to my knowledge, gone further than merely mentioning that fact. For instance, an article like Judith Cochrane's with a very attractive title, "The Role of Mystery in the Works of Camara Laye,"[11] proves disappointing because of its very superficial analysis of the central role of traditional religion in Laye's works. No attempt is made, for instance, to anchor Laye's literary production in the Malinke society from which he draws so much sustenance. The facile temptation of turning to political issues is resorted to and religion is quickly forgotten.

Even though a writer may not always or even often be the best critic of his own works, Laye's assertion about his dedication to the traditional religious beliefs of his people and his incessant search for a key to understanding those religious beliefs seems to me to be the main factor which can throw open the doors into the secret groves of *L'Enfant noir*. Does the polemic surrounding his works not arise from the increasing tendency of most critics to read them in isolation from their social milieu? Has Fredric

Michelman,[12] for example, not taken the English translators of *L'Enfant noir* to task for numerous distortions which result from what he sees as the translators' desire to "purify" Laye's style? This they do by systematically suppressing his extensive use of repetitions which may appear odd to a non-African but which reflect the oral nature of the society. Repetitions also give the text an incantatory atmosphere which suits the very intense religious nature of Laye's work.

It must be stressed that while Laye's intention in *L'Enfant noir* is more artistic than ethnographic, many details from outside the text can go a long way towards enhancing and deepening our appreciation of the work. Were critics to make an effort to venture out into the oral and religiously inspired society of Laye's fiction, fewer of the outrageous and often misleading claims and counter-claims would be made for his works.

Since it is almost impossible in the short time and space available for a thesis chapter to go into the details of every religious aspect in *L'Enfant noir*, I have isolated only two religious elements for analysis. These are the author's obsession with his father's totem (a black snake), the forge and the role of the blacksmith.

L'Enfant noir is a semi-autobiography which was written, according to the author, almost accidentally as a way of dispelling the boredom and anguish of life in exile. At a seminar on African literature held in Dakar, Senegal, in March of 1963, Laye gave what amounted to hints concerning the heavy tone of nostalgia which pervades the entire novel.

> Vivant à Paris, loin de ma Guinée natale, loin de mes parents, et vivant depuis des années dans un isolement rarement interrompu, je me suis transporté mille fois par la pensée dans mon pays, près des miens.
>
> Et puis un jour, j'ai pensé que ces souvenirs, qui à l'époque étaient dans toute leur fraîcheur, pourraient, avec le temps, sinon s'effacer -- comment pourraient-ils s'effacer? -- du moins s'affaiblir, et j'ai commencé de les écrire.[13]

The most important cultural element which he attempts to recapture, analyze and understand is his people's traditional religion. It is quite significant that the novel opens with a very strong religious symbol, the snake. Snakes play an important religious role in the works of Camara Laye as in those of many other African writers. Eric Sellin says that

the snake in Laye's works,

> stands for all the things which Laye reluctantly loses by leaving the environment in which he knew peace. The snake and Laye's perennial perplexity about it symbolize Laye's -- and his protagonists'-- cultural schizophrenia when confronted by African education and European instruction.[14]

Indeed, one of Laye's main regrets in the novel is his inability to penetrate the mystery surrounding the presence of the little black snake which is his father's totem. As the action of the novel opens, we see the young protagonist playing with a little snake totally oblivious of the dangers involved in such a game:

> J'avais ramassé un roseau qui traînait dans la cour...et, à présent, j'enfonçais ce roseau dans la gueule de la bête. Le serpent ne se dérobait pas: il prenait goût au jeu; il avalait lentement le roseau, il l'avalait comme une proie, avec la même volupté, me semblait-il, les yeux brillants de bonheur, et sa tête, petit à petit, se rapprochait de ma main (p.25).

The little boy's game is brutally interrupted by the adult world as his hysterical mother whisks him away to lecture him on the dangers of playing with snakes. He is then given a long talk on the subtle differences between the snakes that frequently crawl around their house. Some, like the one the boy is caught playing with, are dangerous and must be crushed at once, while others are the sacred incarnation of the ancestors of the family and must never be harmed. One of them belongs to his father and serves as his totem.

Perhaps a brief look at the significance of totems in African beliefs could lead one to a better understanding of what has appeared to some critics as sheer fascination with what the Europeans like to think of as the exotic side of African religions. For example, Paul Edwards and Kenneth Ramchand have referred to one of the most beautiful scenes in the book, the goldsmelting scene, as an "inflated commentary which at its worst amounts to a crude insistence upon black mystery."[15] The totem is an object from the animal or plant world which serves to designate a family or a clan collectively. Each family or clan adopts an animal or plant as its crest and sign. The individuals who compose the clan then consider themselves bound by a bond of kinship. This relationship does not necessarily have to be through blood connection; they are relatives by the mere fact that they share

one name. For instance, in *L'Enfant noir* the young Laye discovers to his pride that the medicine man hired to perform circumcision on the neophytes is a Daman, which is his mother's family name with a crocodile as their totem.

The totem is very sacred and, according to Emile Durkheim, it precedes and survives individuals. Individuals die, generations pass and are replaced by others but the totem is always actual, living and unchanging. It animates generations of today as it animated those of yesterday as it will animate those of tomorrow.[16] As the narrator's father tells him, his own totem appeared to him in a dream:

> Il s'est d'abord présenté sous forme de rêve. Plusieurs fois, il m'est apparu et il me disait le jour où il se présenterait réellement à moi, il précisait l'heure et l'endroit (p.31).

The narrator feels cheated and robbed of the opportunity of ever owning a totem of his own since Western education has been a constant interruption in his understanding of the ways of his people. As he says, "Oui, le monde bouge, le monde change; il bouge et change à telle enseigne que mon propre totem -- j'ai mon totem aussi -- m'est inconnu" (p.75). The entire autobiography seems to be one long lament over the loss of his totem and his inability to understand his father's.

One has to understand the very deep desire which the narrator has to penetrate the mystery surrounding his people's religion to realize that he is not merely pandering to the white readers' thirst for what is considered primitive, thus exciting in the African's life as many a critic has implied. His view of Western civilization as an invading and encroaching culture which directly threatens the very survival of traditional religion is seen in the rather curious juxtaposition which he makes of the railroad and the ancestral snake. The railroad winds its way like a snake through Kouroussa, the narrator's town, whisking away the young to a foreign and hostile culture. In addition to luring the young ("j'allais passer de longs moments dans la contemplation de la voie ferrée"), the railroad also attracts snakes. The narrator wonders if it is not the oil spilt from the locomotive which is luring them. There is however the suggestion that the image of the snakes becomes confused with that

of the railroad itself: "Les rails luisaient cruellement dans une lumière que rien, à cet endroit, ne venait tamiser" (p.28). Indeed, the danger for the snakes is real as they are likely to be crushed by the train. The vulnerability of the snakes is symbolic of the very precarious state of the traditional religion of his people.

Is it not rather ironic that the railroad and the snake should be associated with the same important religious source: the forge? For, even though the railroad, the trains, and the locomotives are foreign, they are worked upon by the forces of light and fire and iron; the same forces with which Laye's father works. The engineers in Europe who built the trains are blacksmiths of sorts who manipulate the same metal as Laye's father although they are not aided in their work by the mysterious powers of a black snake.

As a blacksmith, Laye's father works in a forge, one of the most important religious sanctuaries in Africa. One can only understand Laye's obsession with the forces at work in the smelting scene in which his father turns gold trinkets into beautiful jewelry if one looks beyond the text to the significance of the forge in African religious beliefs. The perplexity expressed by the protagonist as he watches his father turn metal into a beautiful piece of jewelry is one clear indication that, like some of the critics of the work, he has not yet understood (probably because of his age) the religious nature of his father's forge.

Dominique Zahan who has lived among the Bambara of West Africa and written quite extensively on them, says that the forge is the "most important 'temple' of fire" in Africa.

> Here the blacksmith, who usually belongs to a special caste in black Africa, devotes himself to the difficult tasks of working iron to furnish the tools for farming or the weapons for hunting and warfare. But the forge is often a place of worship, too. Its ground is sacred, and one enters barefoot in order not to communicate to the "temple" the impurity of the shoe. It is also a place of peace. No dispute is tolerated there, not because of the "spirits" which live there but because it represents a celestial space. There are still other characteristics of the forge which can be added. It is often attributed with the ability to overcome stubborn cases of sterility in women, who seek the intervention of the blacksmith when plagued by such a disgrace. The artisan-priest's mediation with the invisible powers takes place in the enclosure of this workshop-temple. In addition, the forge offers a place of refuge for

> unfortunates seeking asylum. Connected to the notions of fecundity, life, and liberty, it is the most typical sanctuary in African religion, the one which, after the hearth, possesses the widest extension. It is intimately tied to the soil and, relative to the cult of family ancestors, it stresses the importance of the community. If the comparison were not so strong, we could almost say that the forge is the church of the African village.[17]

Given the importance of the forge, it goes without saying that the person who rules over it, the blacksmith, has a social position which is in some way marked in relation to the other members of his society. He occupies a unique position in the cosmogony of numerous tribes in West Africa. On the level of myths and legends, the origin of such caste members as blacksmiths and praise-singers (griots) is linked to blood and violence. Among the Bambara, for example, the ancestor of the praise-singer was Sourakata who was created from the sacrificial blood of Faro (the water genie), while the blacksmith was created from the blood of his castration. The Dogon believe that the ancestors of the men of caste were issued from Nommo (the Word), who was sacrificed in the sky by God. The praise-singer was born from the blood of the throat, the blacksmith from the blood of the umbilical cord and the genitals.[18] Some versions even have it that the blacksmith was the eldest of eight children, born at once, the other seven having issued from one placenta and he from another.

Camara Laye himself has spoken elsewhere of the preternatural role of the blacksmith in the African society, a role which, he regrets, has all but been surpassed by the encroachment of modern technological civilization. He says that

> le forgeron-sculpteur était sorcier, était prêtre, et ... il exerçait plus qu'une activité artisanale.... En ce temps, l'art du forgeron passait de loin les autres, était très réellement un art noble, un art de magicien, un art en vérité, qui requérait plus de connaissance et plus d'habileté que les autres.[19]

The role of the blacksmith as priest, conjurer of supernatural powers and artist is admirably demonstrated in the scene in which Laye's father works on gold for a customer. Throughout the minute description of the process, there is an insistence on the idea of creating a thing of beauty out of mud and chaos. During the operation no one is allowed to speak, not even his father:

> jamais il ne disait mot à ce moment, et personne ne disait mot, personne ne devait dire mot, le griot même cessait d'élever la voix (p.39).

Only his father's lips are moving as he recites what to the little boy appears like incantations to his ancestors.

> Ces paroles que nous n'entendions pas, ces paroles secrètes, ces incantations qu'il adressait à ce que nous ne devions, à ce que nous ne pouvions ni voir ni entendre, c'était là l'essentiel (p.41).

Laye's father appears as the very incarnation of the mysteries of his caste. In him one sees the intimate connection of the trade with the deeper mysteries of traditional life. Despite the fact that he has carved out for himself a place of honour and respect in his society, it has been as a result of industry and persistence. His childhood was a very difficult one. He suffered greatly in the hands of his uncles who perhaps despised him for being of the blacksmith caste.

This may sound like a contradiction but despite the honour he may receive in his society as a result of his mysterious origins and his expertise when it comes to handling supernatural forces, the blacksmith is in reality a very ambivalent personality among many West African tribes. In purely agricultural areas, the blacksmith provides, in addition to his religious role, tools for farming. His social position is very highly valued. However, in such pastoral-agricultural societies as that of the Malinke, the blacksmith generally occupies an inferior position in society to the farmer and the herdsman. As Sandra T. Barnes says,

> Throughout much of the Sudan iron workers form endogamous castes that by definition prevent them from entering into the regular processes of marital exchange. Widespread beliefs that smiths and their female relatives are polluted, sexually dangerous, or taboo reinforce endogamy.[20]

This may explain why the protagonist's parents are both from the blacksmith caste. His mother is a Daman, famous in the land for their totem, the crocodile, which allows them to draw water from the Niger even when it is dangerous for everyone else to do so. The Daman also provide the society with medicinemen of great repute.

One can also interpret the fact that the protagonist's uncles in Tindican choose farming rather than metal work, a profession which they should inherit from their father, as indicative of their desire to move socially into a more respected profession: farming. The young protagonist seems baffled by their having abandoned the forge. He does not know that in his society the farmer comes first in the spectrum of social acceptability and that not every blacksmith receives the same respect and admiration as his father.

One can conclude from looking at only two main items in *L'Enfant noir*, -- belief in totems and the role of the blacksmith -- that overwhelming internal evidence exists to support the contention that traditional religion is an all-pervasive element in the work. Unfortunately, most critics have been quick to dismiss Laye's desire to penetrate the religious elements of his people as sheer sentimentality. But if one takes the pains to examine the religious references in the work against the background of the Malinke society, more light is shed on the numerous religious references in the work and a non-polemical reading of it is made possible.

A. NOTES

[1]In *Présence Africaine*, Nos 24-5(février-mars 1959), p.389.

[2]Césaire, Aimé. *Discours sur le colonialisme.* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955), p.22.

[3]In addition to *L'Enfant noir*, Laye has also written the following works:
1. *Le Regard du roi*, (Paris: Plon, 1954)
2. *Dramouss* (Paris: Plon, 1966)
3. *Le Maître de la parole* (1978)

[4]I am using the edition published by Cambridge University Press in 1966 and edited with an introduction by Joyce A. Hutchinson. Further references are made to this edition and they appear in parenthesis in the text.

[5]Orlando, Walter. *Le Phare*, Brussels, 20 September 1953. Quoted in Adele King. *The Writings of Camara Laye* (London: Heinemann, n.d.), p.98.

[6]A.B. "Afrique noire, littérature rose." *Présence Africaine*, No.12, Avril-Juillet 1955, pp.137-8.

[7]Brench, A.C. "The Novelist's Background in French Colonial Africa," *African Forum*, 3,i(Summer 1967), p.37.

[8]Quoted by Adele King, *The Writings of Camara Laye*, op.cit., p.98.

[9]ibid., p.99.

[10]Quoted by James Olney in *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p.136.

[11]Cochrane, Judith. "The Role of Mystery in the Works of Camara Laye" in *Literary Half-Yearly*, XVIII, 2(July 1977), p.121-133

[12]Michelman, Fredric. "From *L'Enfant noir* to *The Dark Child*: The Drumbeats of Words Silenced" in Lemuel A. Johnson, Bernadette Cailler, Russell Hamilton, and Mildred Hill-Lubin, eds. *Towards Defining the African Aesthetic* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), pp.105-111.

[13]Laye, Camara. "L'Ame de l'Afrique dans sa partie guinéenne," *Actes du colloque sur la litterature africaine d'expression française*, Dakar, 26-29 Mars 1963 (Dakar: Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 1965), pp.121-2.

[14]Sellin, Eric. "Alienation in Camara Laye," *Pan-African Journal*, IV,4(Fall 1971). pp.458-9.

[15]Edwards, Paul and Kenneth Ramchand. "African Sentimentalist: Camara Laye's *The African Child*" in Eldred Jones, ed. *African Literature Today*, No.4, p.40.

[16]Durkheim, Emile. "The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life," in William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds. *Reader in Comparative Religion*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), p.34.

[17]Zahan, Dominique. *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa.* Transl. by Kate Ezra Martin and Lawrence M. Martin (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p.30.

[18]ibid., p.123. Several studies have been carried out on the origin of castes in West Africa. One can cite among the most comprehensive of these studies Hugo Zemp's "La légende des griots malinkés," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines,* VI,21-24 (1966), pp.611-642, in which he gives over 30 different versions relating to the legends and myths surrounding especially the praise-singer and the blacksmith in West Africa. Mamby Sidibé's "Les gens de caste ou *nyamakala,*" *Notes Africaines,* No. 81(Janvier 1959), pp.13-17, gives an interesting but rather superficial analysis which falls far short of Zemp's efforts.

[19]Laye, Camara. *Dramouss.*(Paris: Plon, 1966), pp.165-6.

[20]Barnes, Sandra T. *Ogun: An Old God for a New Age.* (Philadelphia: ISHI Occasional Papers in Social Change, No.3, 1980), p.11.

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V. WORSHIPPING ANCESTORS: ACHEBE'S USE OF TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN *Things Fall Apart*

When I was discussing the reception accorded Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* by his African counterparts, I mentioned that one of the main areas of contention was Laye's apparent lack of sensitivity to the political implications arising out of the traumatic collision of the traditional institutions of Africa with colonialism and its accompanying trinity: Christianity, commerce and the colonial administration. Most detractors of Laye point to the fact that he seems to ignore the subsequent social, religious, psychological and moral dislocations which colonialism caused the African. These were considered in those days to be the most important if not the only issues which the African writer had to address. He was expected to spearhead the struggle against the atmosphere of oppression promoted by colonialism and by so doing he would also be fulfilling one of the vital roles of a writer as a teacher to his people.

One writer who has openly preached the educational role of the African writer in his society is Chinua Achebe (born 1930) of Nigeria. He is the author of four novels which can be considered a tetralogy, documenting Nigerian history from the later part of the nineteenth century to the mid-1960s. *Things Fall Apart*, his first novel, appeared in 1958, the centenary of Christianity's arrival in his village. Its action is set at the turn of the century when the British first came to Igboland. *No Longer at Ease* (1960), his second novel, is a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*. Its hero, Obi Okonkwo, is the grandson of Okonkwo the hero of *Things Fall Apart*. His third novel, *Arrow of God* (1964), is a return to the past and the early period of initial interaction between the Igbo and the British. The action takes off where *Things Fall Apart* ends and Achebe justifies his return to the past by saying that he is "basically an ancestor-worshipper" and that since writing *No Longer at Ease*, he had "learned a lot more about these particular people..., [his] ancestors."[1] His 1966 novel, *A Man of the People*, is set in pre-independence Nigeria and is largely considered a prophetic work since it ends with a military takeover, thus foreshadowing events in

Nigeria that same year. Each of these novels deals with an amazing panorama of changes that have taken place in Nigeria from the colonial period to the present.

For this study, I have chosen his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*.[2] Few works of fiction from Africa have received as many literary accolades as has *Things Fall Apart*. Most critics consider it "probably the most widely read, most widely studied, and most widely acclaimed African novel to date."[3] Achebe has often been asked why he wrote the novel and one of his responses, as we saw while discussing the influence of colonial literature on African writers, was his attempt to undo what Joyce Cary had done in his works, especially in *Mr Johnson* where the Nigerian appears only as a buffoon. He has also said that he wanted to deal fairly with his ancestors, to "set the score right."[4] He once told an American audience that he wrote it as "an act of atonement with [his] past, the ritual return of a prodigal son."[5]

He has spoken elsewhere of the need for the writer to teach his people

> "that their past -- with all its imperfections -- was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them."[6]

One of the main elements which Achebe, like most other African writers, wants to liberate from centuries of European disdain is the traditional religion of his people. Almost every critic of his work has mentioned, at least in passing, the central role played by traditional religion but hardly anyone has ventured beyond such a recognition. For instance, Eustace Palmer, impressed by the omnipresence of traditional religion in *Things Fall Apart*, says that the novel

> demonstrates the paramountcy of religious beliefs in nineteenth-century Iboland. Societies which missionaries later branded as pagan were in fact more religious than anything that had been seen in the Western world for a very long time. No major enterprise, whether national or personal, was undertaken without first attempting to divine the will of the gods.[7]

Like most other critics, Palmer does not go further to demonstrate how a careful study of these religious beliefs can throw more light on Achebe's novel. In fact, a few attempts to study the religious elements in *Things Fall Apart* have ended in polemics since the critics

have often been anthropologists in quest of authentic ethnographic data.[8]

The novel itself is divided into three parts, kind of a trinity. Since it is Achebe's avowed aim to show that the traditions of his people had an innate dignity before the white man's intrusion defiled them, he reserves the first part of *Things Fall Apart* for a composite picture of Igbo culture as it was then. The society is still relatively stable and unpolluted by foreign ideas. He does not, however, paint for us an idyllic society in which everything traditional is glorious and perfect as did Camara Laye and the members of the Negritude movement. Achebe shows that even within a "purely" traditional society, numerous contradictions exist which eventually lead to internal weaknesses and thus prepare the way for the inevitable triumph of colonialism backed by Christianity. Parts two and three of the novel deal with the rapid disintegration of a tension-riddled traditional society which quickly crumbles when it clashes with the ruthless determination of christians and their proselytizing mission.

The entire story revolves around Okonkwo, a man who is both heroic and tortured by a feeling of his own inadequacies. Despite his constant violations of traditional religious mores -- he beats his wife during the Week of Peace, he participates in the killing of Ikemefuna despite advice to the contrary, etc.--he emerges as a fierce and an uncompromising combatant for traditional values. When he inadvertently kills a tribesman, he submits meekly to the sanction of a seven-year exile. It is during his exile years that the white man settles in his village and disrupts the normal flow of events with his religion. Unable to accept the white presence, Okonkwo kills a messenger of the colonial administration and commits suicide rather than be taken alive. His death marks the end of the supremacy of traditional religion and the beginning of another, Christianity.

As I did while discussing Camara Laye's use of traditional religion in *L'Enfant noir*, I will choose a few religious elements and try to make their use in the work more meaningful by looking at them within the Igbo cosmology. The first of these elements which proves to be a pivotal point in the development of the story is the presence in

Okonkwo's household of a war hostage called Ikemefuna. Who Ikemefuna is and how he becomes part of Okonkwo's household involves the entire mechanism of Igbo religion: the assembly of elders, traditional system of justice, the role of the Oracle of Hills and Caves as well as the actions of individual elders and heads of families such as Okonkwo, Ezeudu and Obierika.

Ikemefuna is first introduced into the story in a very unobtrusive way, appearing at the end of the first chapter, tacked onto the tail-end of an impressive series of achievements by Okonkwo, a man who has risen from very modest beginnings to occupy, through industry and determination, an enviable position in the social, religious and political hierarchy of the tribe. Ikemefuna is a war hostage from the neighbouring village of Mbaino. A member of his village has murdered a woman from Umuofia, Okonkwo's village. Umuofia's reaction to the incident gives us an insight into the organization of the village. Since, like most Igbo societies, Umuofia does not have kings and chiefs, as is the case among, for example, the Yoruba, decisions of such weighty importance as war are made by the assembly of elders after consultation with the gods of the land. So important is the deciding vote of the deities that the people have to bow to their decisions unquestioningly.

> Umuofia was feared by all its neighbours. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine-men were feared in all the surrounding country.... Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old. But on one point there was general agreement -- the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called agadi-nwayi, or old woman. It had its shrine in the centre of Umuofia, in a cleared spot. And if anybody was so foolhardy as to pass by the shrine after dusk he was sure to see the old woman hopping about.
>
> And so the neighbouring clans who naturally knew of these things feared Umuofia, and would not go to war against it without first trying a peaceful settlement. And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle -- the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan had disobeyed the Oracle they would have been beaten, because their dreaded agadi-nwayi would never fight what the Ibo call *a fight of blame (p.9).*

In the case of the war against Mbaino, Umuofia's case is just and the inhabitants of Mbaino themselves concede this fact by choosing not to fight. Instead they give a virgin

to replace the murdered wife, and since a life has been taken another will have to be taken as well. It is Ikemefuna who is chosen to serve as the sacrificial lamb. In the treatment meted out to him lie some of the latent controversies which prove in the long run to be the Achilles heel of traditional religion. Let us follow for a while his three-year stay in Okonkwo's household.

He quickly becomes a fullfledged member of the household. His influence is particularly felt by Okonkwo's rather effeminate son, Nwoye.

> He [Ikemefuna] was by nature a very lively boy and he gradually became popular in Okonkwo's household, especially with the children. Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who was two years younger, became quite inseparable from him because he seemed to know everything. He could fashion out flutes from bamboo stems and even from the elephant grass. He knew the names of all the birds and could set clever traps for little bush rodents. And he knew which trees made the strongest bows (p.20).

Even Okonkwo himself, a man who never shows "any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger," is affected by the young boy's charm and grace. It is precisely at the moment when Okonkwo's family seems happiest, that the gods of the land decide to strike Ikemefuna.

> Okonkwo sat in his obi crunching happily with Ikemefuna and Nwoye, and drinking palm-wine copiously, when Ogbuefi Ezeudu came in. Ezeudu was the oldest man in this quarter of Umuofia. He had been a great and fearless warrior in his time, and was now accorded great respect in all the clan. He refused to join in the meal, and asked Okonkwo to have a word with him outside. And so they walked out together, the old man supporting himself with his stick. When they were out of ear-shot, he said to Okonkwo:
>
> "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death." Okonkwo was surprised, and was about to say something when the old man continued:
>
> "Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father"(p.40).

The narrator's detached serenity reveals the intense cruelty in the finality of the Oracle's decision. No questions are asked and no explanations given. Since the traditional system does not offer room for reconciliation or for questioning the decisions of the Oracle, the venerable Ezeudu proposes a more humane way out of the dilemma for Okonkwo -- he asks him not to have a hand in the boy's death.

It is to Achebe's credit as a consummate and skilful artist that every detail of the Igbo religious or judicial system goes to enhance and enlighten an aspect of the hero's personality. When he is advised not to take part in the boy's execution, Okonkwo is immediately gripped by a very strong latent fear -- the fear of being thought as weak as his father who was a worthless debt-ridden man. Not only does he defy the old man and accompany the executioners, it is he who delivers the fatal blow.

> As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, "My father, they have killed me!" as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak (p.43).

The killing of Ikemefuna proves to be the turning point in the narrative. First of all, it widens the already deep gap that separates Okonkwo from his son, Nwoye, for whom Ikemefuna has been like an elder brother. Much later when Christianity arrives in the land, Nwoye joins it as a way of rejecting his father and the inscrutable decisions of traditional gods. The magnitude of Nwoye's action can only be fully grasped if seen from within the traditional system of son-father relationship, a particularly powerful bond which is based on traditional religious beliefs, especially the cult of the ancestors. A father tries to bring up his son in the best tradition of the clan so that at his death his son would perform the proper funeral rites to smooth his way into the spirit world.

By defecting to the christians, Nwoye has rejected his father's hopes of ever getting a smooth departure to his ancestral abode. Nwoye's action has extremely serious repercussions for the tribal belief in age-old family values. Emmanuel Obiechina says that

> The relationship between father and sons was crucial to the traditional system because it is the foundation of the ancestral authority upon which the continuity of the institutions, common values, attitudes and sentiments of the traditional culture depended.[9]

The second point one can make about the killing of Ikemefuna is the important role of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves (who is also the Oracle of the Earth Goddess) and whose influence seems to permeate the entire novel. Any reader who has followed Ikemefuna's development from the time he is brought to Okonkwo's household to the

apparently senseless decision to kill him, is bound to feel a sense of revolt against such an action. In fact, the reader tends quickly to agree with Nwoye for rejecting a system which can so coldly elect to eliminate a child for no apparent reason.

However, we may find this action, not less revolting, but somehow less intriguing if we place it within the traditional religious context of Igboland. We should understand that as a war hostage, the boy is considered the bearer of the guilt of his people and must be sacrificed to expiate their crime of homicide. As Obiechina says,

> When he falls, he does so by the operation of the lex talionis, for many traditional Africans like the jews of old believed in an eye for an eye and a life for a life, especially in their dealings with those outside their own corporate groups.[10]

The communal interest must at all times subvert the individual's desire for personal goals. The Oracle of the Earth Goddess is the most important personality in the land. The earth for an agricultural people holds the key to the very survival of the group and the will of the earth goddess is law. The overpowering presence of the Oracle can best be understood if we look at the relevance of the earth to Igbo culture. C.D. Forde and G.I. Jones say that

> Ale (Ala or Ane), the earth spirit, is the most prominent deity and is regarded as the queen of the underworld and the "owner" of men whether dead or alive. She is the source and judge of human morality and accordingly exercises the main ritual sanctions in disputes and offences. Homicide, kidnapping, poisoning, stealing farm products, adultery and giving birth to twins or abnormal children are all offences against Ale. Laws are made and oaths sworn in her name. Priests of Ale are guardians of public morality and the cult of Ale is one of the most powerful integrating forces in Ibo society.[11]

The killing of twins is another intensely cruel aspect of the powerful earth goddess. Indeed, as Edmund Ilogu says, the fate of twins in Igbo religion is a sad one.

> It was an old Ibo custom to destroy twins because it was considered unnatural for human beings to be born more than one at a time, only lower animals like hens, goats, dogs and the rest could give birth to more than one at a time. A woman giving birth to twins would therefore need a special cleansing sacrifice and the twin children would be destroyed, otherwise the land thus abominated would incur the wrath of the ancestral spirits, which would plague the community, because the "natural" harmony between man, the spirit world and the cosmos in general, had been destroyed.[12]

Achebe does not hide the fact that such latent contradictions in the traditional religious system as the killing of an innocent boy-hostage and the custom of abandoning twins in the bush contributed to the successful challenge mounted by Christianity against traditional religion. The missionaries, unlike the elders of the land, preach brotherly love for all even for such societal rejects as slaves, osus (religious outcasts), twins and the mothers of twins. By so doing they appeal to the deeply felt feelings of many people who have been victimized by the inscrutable decisions of the gods of the land. It is these same victims who now embrace their newly-found religion with a determination bordering on fanaticism. When the time comes for a show-down with traditional religion, these new converts prove to be very valuable ammunition for the missionary success.

One would be wrong to conclude from my analysis of traditional religion in *Things Fall Apart* based on two elements only -- the death of Ikemefuna and the killing of twins-- that life in Umuofia before the Europeans came was "one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf" had come to liberate the inhabitants. If we retrace our steps and look closely at the overall structure of the society prior to the arrival of Europeans, we are struck, not by the anarchism which the British believed ruled Igboland, but rather by a well-structured society based upon a hierarchy of gods, ancestors, elders and the family. Like most, and perhaps all pre-colonial societies in Africa, Umuofia subsists on the collective will of its people who are linked together by a closeknit of social, political, economic and especially religious relationships.

One excellent example of the ordered nature of Umuofia is the way in which everyday contentions in society are resolved. There is a remarkable scene in which Achebe reveals to us the inextricable link between the judicial process and the religious system in Igboland. This involves the egwugwu episode in Chapter Ten which is worth looking at in some detail since it also reveals the significant role played by Okonkwo in the ancestral court of the land.

In real life the egwugwu or the masked representatives of the ancestors, are distinguished titled men but once they put on the masks of ritual, no villager can dare think of them as ordinary mortals. They become the spirits of the ancestors. Their appearance amongst the living usually causes quite a stir. We see this when they appear to hear the trivial domestic dispute between a man and his in-laws whom he accuses of having kidnapped his wife. Once the elaborate preparations for the trial are over, the egwugwu make their dramatic appearance in the market square.

> The women and children sent up a great shout and took to their heels. It was instinctive. A woman fled as soon as an egwugwu came in sight. And when, as on that day, nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan came out together it was a terrifying spectacle....
>
> Each of the nine egwugwu represented a village of the clan. Their leader was called Evil Forest. Smoke poured out of his head....
>
> Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second egwugwu had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of egwugwu. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. The egwugwu with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan....
>
> When all the egwugwu had sat down and the sound of the many tiny bells and rattles on their bodies had subsided, Evil Forest addressed the two groups of people facing them.
>
> "Uzowulu's body, I salute you," he said. Spirits always addressed humans as "bodies." Uzowulu bent down and touched the earth with his right hand as a sign of submission.
>
> "Our father, my hand has touched the ground," he said.
>
> Uzowulu's body, do you know me?" asked the spirit.
>
> "How can I know you, father? You are beyond our knowledge."
>
> Evil Forest then turned to the other group and addressed the eldest of the three brothers.
>
> "The body of Odukwe, I greet you," he said, and Odukwe bent down and touched the earth. The hearing then began (pp.63-4).

A number of things are worth considering in this episode. First, there is the very formal way in which the spirits act. Their greetings, gestures, as well as the ceremonious way in which they appear "from the underworld" point to a very well-oiled system which has been in use for countless generations before the Europeans came in with their court system. The awesome presence of the spirits does not in any way exclude dialogue as the litigants are allowed to present their testimony in an atmosphere free of coercion. Second, the masked spirits resolve the case in a very simple way by asking the man who

had beaten his wife and now seeks a divorce, to go back to her people and apologize for his action. It is a resolution which shows that the tribal machinery is more concerned with maintaining collective harmony and peaceful coexistence than with searching to find out who is right and who is wrong. Here again the collective good of all is shown to supersede the individual's concerns.

The egwugwu episode is significant in one other respect. It shows the important position of Okonkwo, the hero, in his society. Achebe does this with a slight touch of irony when he tells us that the women might have recognized "the springy walk of Okonkwo" in the second egwugwu. The elaborate description of the trial which some critics dismiss as mere indulgence in anthropological adventure, not only provides background to the story, it also has an artistic function since it helps us to see another facet of the hero's life. Unlike David Ananou who only uses characters in *Le fils du fétiche* as an excuse to indulge in lengthy discourses on traditional customs, Achebe only presents those aspects of his people's culture which serve an aesthetic purpose in the story such as intensifying dramatic action and conflict, enhancing character development or setting the general tone of the narration.

The egwugwu scene leaves one with the impression of an elaborate but very meaningful ceremony which forms an integral part of a highly ordered and humane society. One has the feeling that without any outside interference, such a society could preserve itself regardless of visible internal stresses. The outside forces which ultimately defeat traditional religion and its institutions by taking advantage of internal tensions are brought in by the European. The second and third parts of the novel deal with that confrontation between the traditional and the imported.

It has often been said that in order to usher in the new forces into Umuofia unopposed, Achebe has used the technique of exiling his main character, Okonkwo, by making him commit an inadvertent murder in his homeland. He is thus forced to seek asylum in his mother's homeland and it is only then that news is brought to him of the

arrival of missionaries and their proselytizing endeavours in Umuofia. While there is no doubt that Okonkwo would have opposed even singlehandedly the advent of Christianity, the question is whether he would have been effective. That is very doubtful. The extermination of the village of Abame -- an act whose repercussions are deeply felt in Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God* -- stands as a grim reminder to the villagers of the ruthlessness of British punitive expeditions against people who tamper with their rule. The first white man to arrive in Abame is said by the Oracle to bring misfortune to the land. He is killed and the British retaliate by wiping out the whole clan. It is therefore doubtful that Okonkwo would have affected any change whatsoever in the penetration of Christianity into his land.

What is important to us here, however, is the reaction of traditional religion at the moment of contact with the alien culture. The religious rulers of the land make the fatal mistake of dismissing those attracted to the new religion --slaves, mothers of twins, twins, etc. -- as a good riddance for society.

> They were mostly the kind of people that were called efulefu, worthless, empty men. The imagery of an efulefu in the language of the clan was a man who sold his matchet and wore the sheath to battle. Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, called the converts the excrement of the clan, and the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up (p.101).

This proves to be a regrettable underestimation of the new converts who are fiercely determined to establish their newly found faith and to dismantle the traditional institutions which have so blatantly ostracised them from the mainstream of societal life. Some of them become so fanatical that they even kill and eat a python, the most sacred animal in Igbo religion. To be in a position to gauge the immensity of the sacrilege such an action represents for the traditional society, one has to look beyond the world of fiction to the West African societies themselves. Geoffey Parrinder can help us fathom the dilemma for traditional religion when such an important animal as the python is threatened. He says that

> The sacred snake is usually the python, a non-poisonous snake which crushes its prey. Because it sheds its skin it is regarded as immortal, as in the Genesis

> myth where it claims to know the secret of immortality. The snake is often connected with the ancestors and the underworld; sometimes it has the secret of sex.
>
> Snake temples are found along the coastline and up the rivers. Famous temples are in Dahomey [today Benin] and in the Niger Delta.... The Dahomeans believe that the snakes are ancestors incarnate. Pythons are kept tame in temples, and if one strays into the streets people who meet it bow down, put dust on their heads, and salute it as father. It is the greatest crime ever to kill a python. If a python is found dead, it is wrapped in a white cloth and buried like a human being.[13]

The serpent, one might hasten to add, is not only prominent in the religious systems of West African tribes. It has always played an important role in the religious systems of different peoples around the world from time immemorial. The wisdom of the serpent as the familiar of wise men, mages and medicinemen (e.g. Moses, Hermes, Asklepios) was very deeply rooted in the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greece.[14] It would seem that Western literature has also made abundant use of the image of snakes although, unlike African literature, it seems to have inherited mainly the negative aspects of it from biblical stories. The image of the serpent in Milton's *Paradise Lost* comes to mind most readily.

One can hardly appreciate the violent confrontation between Christianity and the traditional religion in Achebe's fiction if one ignores the importance of the python. To the christians snakes of any sort symbolize the evil force that led Eve astray thereby bringing doom upon mankind. To the traditionalists, however, snakes, especially the python, are the very essence of their religious beliefs. An attack on the python becomes a thrust into the very heart of the people's religion. (Achebe takes up this point more forcefully in *Arrow of God* where the Chief Priest's son, Oduche, a new convert to Christianity, imprisons a python in his box and when it is finally released, it emerges weak and exhausted. His action intensifies the symbolism of traditional religion as a force struggling in the iron-grips of an encroaching and determined Christianity.)

In the most serious attack against traditional religion in *Things Fall Apart*, a convert, himself the son of a snake-priest, unmasks an egwugwu, the representative of the ancestors, in public. His blasphemy is beyond words since

> One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an egwugwu in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated (pp. 131-2).

As it is to be expected, the response from a threatened and increasingly impatient traditional order is not long in coming.

> That night the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming -- its own death (p. 132).

The spirits then assemble and move "like a furious whirlwind to Enoch's compound and with matchet and fire [reduce] it to a desolate heap." They then move to the church which they destroy despite the opposition from the missionary, the hardliner, Mr Smith. Unfortunately for the elders of the land, they fail to consider the more sinister force lurking behind the activities of the missionaries in their land. The colonial administration arrests their leaders -- Okonkwo among them -- and puts them through a very humiliating experience. When they are finally released, they call a meeting to map a common strategy against the white man. It is in the course of this meeting that an enraged and humiliated Okonkwo kills one of the messengers sent by the white man to put a stop to the meeting. When he realizes that his people are not ready to back him, he commits suicide.

What is significant in this last confrontation, however, is the skill with which Achebe draws out our empathy for traditional religion. He juxtaposes the tolerant actions of the elders of the land with the unjustified aggressions of the new converts, thereby presenting Christianity as a ruthless and uncompromising force intolerant of any other views but its own. As usual his hero, Okonkwo, is at the centre of every controversy in the novel. By taking his own life, he pollutes the very traditional system he has fought so hard to preserve. His bitter end ironically mirrors his father's who died of the dreadful disease dropsy and had to be thrown away in the Evil Forest as a pollutant. Okonkwo suffers a similar fate since "a man who commits [suicide] will not be buried by his clansmen...." Sacrifices have to be made to cleanse the land desecrated by his action.

Okonkwo's death announces the end of an era, the final disintegration of the inflexible religious order. This does not mean that traditional religion has ceased to exist. On the contrary, it has merely adapted itself to the new order and recognized that henceforth there is another religion in the land backed by a ruthless military might far superior to anything the land can come up with. That is why the elders refuse to follow Okonkwo's frontal attack preferring instead to bend in the new breeze so as not to break.

In conclusion, it should be reiterated that traditional religion permeates the entire structure of *Things Fall Apart* as it does that of Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* and that of numerous other works of fiction from Africa. This fact, however, is hardly evident from the impressive scholarship that exists on Achebe's literary production since the element of traditional religion is usually either ignored altogether or mentioned only in passing. This is surprising seeing that Achebe does much more with traditional religion than critics have thus far given him credit for. He shows that prior to the arrival of the whites and their religious system, traditional religion and its laws were the ultimate authority in the land. Despite his desire to prove to the world that his people's ways had an innate dignity which colonialism tried to erode, he is not blind to the shortcomings of those tribal beliefs. Had the religious ways of his people not been riddled with latent controversies -- the killing of twins, the existence of outcasts, etc.-- Christianity would not have found so readily a fertile soil as it did in Igboland. He gives Christianity credit for being able to appeal so forcefully to the victims of traditional religion thus winning them over and in turn capitalizing on their fanaticism to attack and destroy the very foundations on which traditional institutions are built.

By skilfully contrasting Christianity with his people's sense of religious duty, Achebe presents his people's religion as being much more humane -- despite the numerous contradictions in it -- than Christianity. He once explained during an interview that the kind of fanaticism expressed by such missionaries as Mr Smith who leads an unjustified assault on Igbo religion, is very rare among the Igbo. Why is this so?

> Because the Ibos have a very strong belief in dualities: things do not come singly but in twos. That's very, very important in everything we do. So that if there's one form of religion, there is bound to be another form.
>
> On the whole, it would have been the christians who introduced the idea of a single-minded, dogmatic belief. It was the missionaries -- who had, after all, to be single-minded to travel all that distance to come and tell somebody that he was worshipping idols. I can't imagine Ibos travelling 4,000 miles to tell anybody their worship was wrong![15]

What one tends to remember most clearly at the end of the novel, therefore, is not so much the brutality of Igbo religion as its compromising live-and-let-live stance which is so ruthlessly abused by the colonial administration and the missionary-led zealots. The so-often-made assertion that Achebe is a dispassionate and objective writer who hardly takes sides seems to me to be very shaky. How can a man who succeeds so well in enlisting our empathy for the ways of his people which he admits are far from perfect be said to be dispassionate and totally objective? His genius resides in the fact that unlike Negritude writers who so often indulge in a sort of narcissistic depiction of the traditions of their people while obstinately refusing to see any bad side to them, Achebe presents the good and the bad in Igbo religion. He then makes us agree with him that despite its glaring weaknesses, his people's religion is much more accomodating, hence much more humane, than the so-called "civilized" Christianity which, through its barbaric assaults on the traditional institutions of the land, is anything but civilized. It is Achebe's way of achieving one of his original goals: "to set the score right" by dealing fairly with the beliefs of his ancestors.

A. NOTES

[1]Interview with Lewis Nkosi in *Africa Report*, July 1964, p.20.

[2]*Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958). I am, however, using the 1978 edition which has been completely reset. Subsequent page references are to this edition and are found in parenthesis in the text.

[3]Ackley, Donald G. "The Male-Female Motif in *Things Fall Apart*" in *Studies in Black Literature*, 5,i(1974), p.1. A number of other critics have also pointed out the prominence of this novel in African literature. Eustace Palmer says that no other novel by Achebe comes close to it in artistic excellence. (See his *The Growth of the African Novel* (London: Heinemann, .1979), especially pp.63-101.) For his part, Solomon Iyasere calls the novel "Achebe's first and most impressive novel." (See his article "Narrative Techniques in *Things Fall Apart* in *New Letters*, Spring (1974), pp.73-93.)

[4]Awoonor, Kofi. "A Study of the Influences of Oral Literature on the Contemporary Literature of Africa," Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1972, p.21. Later published as *The Breast of the Earth: A Survey of the History, Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara* (Garden City : Doubleday, 1975).

[5]Quoted by Robert Wren in his impressive work on Achebe entitled *Achebe's World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), p.15.

[6]Achebe, Chinua. "The Novelist as Teacher" in G.D. Killam, ed. *African Writers on African Writing* (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp.3-4.

[7]Palmer, Eustace. *The Growth of the African Novel*, op.cit., p.65. One can also mention among others the following articles that deal in part or in whole with one aspect or another of traditional religion in *Things Fall Apart*:
Donald J. Weinstock, "Achebe's Christ-Figure" in *Journal of the New African Literature and the Arts*, Spring and Fall (1968), pp.21-6.
Prema Nandakumar, "The Theme of Religion in the Fiction of Chinua Achebe" in *Journal of the Karnatak University -- Humanities*, No.20(1976), pp.257-64.
Donald G. Ackley, "The Male-Female Motif in *Things Fall Apart*" op.cit., pp.1-6.
Richard Bryan McDaniel, "The Python Episodes in Achebe's Novels" in *The International Fiction Review*, 3,ii(July 1976), pp.100-6.
Christie C. Achebe, "Literary Insight into the ogbanje Phenomenon" in *Journal of African Studies* (Los Angeles), VII, i(n.d.), pp.31-8.

[8]In a review of *Things Fall Apart*, Hassoldt Davis says that "No European ethnologist could so intimately present this medley of mores of the Ibo tribe, so detailed the intricate formalities of life in the clan." (See his "Jungle Strongman" in *Saturday Review*, XXXXII(January 31, 1959), p.18.) Another reviewer for *Time*, LXXXVII (August 19, 1966), p. 18, says that Achebe's *A Man of the People* "is worth a ton of documentary journalism."

[9]Obiechina, Emmanuel. *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1975), pp.218-9.

[10]ibid., p.213.

[11]Quoted by Emmanuel Obiechina, op.cit., p.212.

[12]Ilogu, Edmond. *Christianity and Igbo Culture* (New York: Nok Publishers, Ltd, 1974), p.64.

[13]Parrinder, Geoffrey *African Traditional Religion* (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), p.51.

[14]LaBarre, Weston *They Shall Take Up Serpents* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p.59.

[15]Interview conducted by Anthony Appiah with John Ryle and D.A.N. Jones. *Times Literary Supplement*, February 26, 1982, p.209.

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VI. CONCLUSION

My approach to the use of traditional religion in the African novel (whether written by Africans or non-Africans) has been basically historical in nature. The reason for this is that if one is to be in a position to point a convincing accusatory finger at modern critics of African literature for overlooking and downplaying the significance of traditional religion in African literature, one has to take a look into the past to see what critics and writers alike have done to the religious beliefs of African peoples. These beliefs have been the most resilient elements of culture which the literary traditions (oral or written) of the Western world have from time immemorial found most intriguing. They have also been the most misunderstood and the most maligned aspects of the African's way of life. Interest in the cultural life of the African reached its zenith in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when European "crocodile writers" joined the debate over some of the pseudo-scientific theories that were being bantered about in scientific circles over "primitive man." The popular writer, as we have seen, was only keen on presenting the sensational side of Africa and the picture of the African was that of a man living in a "world of witches and wizards, or magic and magician, of jungle life, ritual murder and mumbo jumbo."[1]

It was the popular writer who was most effective in creating the long lasting image of Africa as a continent of dark deeds which the missionary and the colonial administrator took with them when they went to Africa. The first African writer educated for a purely missionary function proved to be the echo of his master's voice, praising Christianity and condemning traditional religion. Whether in the hands of missionaries or of their first converts, traditional religion was seen as an evil which had to be extirpated before the African could eventually be saved from sure damnation. Thus the thread that ran through the whole tribal life[2] -- traditional religion -- was torn loose.

It was that torn thread in the cultural infrastructure of Africa that the second generation of African writers -- represented in this thesis by Camara Laye and Chinua Achebe

-- attempted to repair. Unfortunately for African scholarship, it seems to me that critics have largely ignored the writers' rehabilitation efforts or have not done enough to comment on them. Thus, whatever the period, whether the pre-colonial and colonial or the pre-and post-independence periods, traditional religion in the novel remains a very controversial, yet neglected subject.

It has been my argument all along that this controversy would not arise if critics were to search for clarification beyond the pages of fiction into the society from which the works emanate. This I have strived to do by choosing two of -- in my opinion -- the most representative novels which have dwelt lengthily on the traditional elements of the writers' societies. I have attempted to show that if Laye's very controversial, though excellent semi-autobiography, *L'Enfant noir*, could be read with the culture of the Malinke people in mind, the basis for the polemics raging around it would be destroyed. I have also endeavoured to show that if some of the beliefs of the Igbo people, which Achebe has revealed in the pages of *Things Fall Apart* with what some critics believe is dispassionate objectivity, are looked at from within the Igbo society itself, they would appear much less incomprehensible than they are now.

I am very conscious of the fact that some objections might be raised about my limiting this study to novels that appeared before 1960, the period of independence for most African countries. In a thesis for a Master of Arts degree, one is very limited by time and space and can hardly cover in any significant detail the spectrum of the material available to him on any one subject. The enormous subject of traditional religion in the African novel can only be thoroughly dissected, analyzed and commented upon in any significant depth in a work other than a Master's thesis.

A. NOTES

[1]Obiechina, E.N. "Transition from Oral to Literary Tradition," *Présence Africaine*, No.63(1976), p.146.

[2]The expression is from Robert E. McDowell. See his article "Africa in the Wake of Christianity," *New Campus Review*(Denver), 2,i(1968), p.43.

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